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Embracing Problems, Processes, and Contact Zones: Using Youth Participatory Action Research
to Challenge Adultism

Genia M. Bettencourt

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Embracing Problems, Processes, and Contact Zones: Using Youth Participatory Action Research
to Challenge Adultism

The goal of youth participatory action research (YPAR) is collaborative research in which youth take leadership while adults provide support (Ozer & Wright, 2012). As an approach, YPAR shifts dynamics of doing research and advocates for doing work with, instead of on, youth (Freire, 1970; Torre & Fine, 2006). The opportunity to participate in YPAR can be emancipatory and visionary for participants, facilitating opportunities to critique the status quo and generate new possibilities (Ginwright, 2008). However, in practice, there are many challenges to achieving a fully cooperative and participant-driven process between youth and adults. For example, youth may need support to learn how to conduct research, necessitating high degrees of involvement from adults to support the process (Neuman, 2006; Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2014). The challenge of creating a collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship is complicated within the United States by the cultural context of adultism—the idea that youth are marginalized due to their age and experience (Bell, 2010). This paper explores the tension between cultural expectations of adult authority and collaborative approaches to action research to examine how transformative social change is possible through YPAR work.

Engaging in successful YPAR requires reconceptualization of adult and youth relationships (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). In this paper, I position YPAR as a tool to challenge traditional structures of adultism and oppression (Bell, 2010; Freire, 1970) by drawing upon the assets and positionality youth possess (Yosso, 2005). By framing YPAR as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991; Torre & Fine, 2008), emphasizing skill development through problem-posing education (Freire, 1970), and prioritizing the process over a concrete result, I demonstrate that participants can engage with in-group social dynamics as a learning opportunity rather than a reification of

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power. For adult researchers engaged in YPAR work, I advocate for measures of accountability that include critical engagement with academia, reflexivity, and youth-centered design. These considerations include individual, collective, and institutional measures. Although YPAR literature typically refers to individuals within high school or early adulthood (Irizarry, 2011; Tuck et al., 2008), I use a broad definition here to correspond with the definition of adultism (e.g., oppression of those under the age of 18) as the framework can be applied to multiple demographics of youth participants (e.g., middle school students, high school students).

YPAR Overview

YPAR stems from the umbrella of participatory action research (PAR). To provide context, the following section describes the nature of YPAR as both a research method and a theoretical construct. As YPAR utilizes communities of adult and adolescent researchers rather than traditional participants, I use the term adult researcher here to signify individuals who typically serve as primary investigators in academic contexts and lead projects (e.g., faculty, graduate students, community leaders). In contrast, the term youth researchers implies individuals under the age of 18 that are engaged in collaborative inquiry.

PAR is defined as “an empirical methodological approach in which people directly affected by a problem under investigation engage as co-researchers in the research process, which includes action, or intervention, into the problem” (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 23). In YPAR, the people affected by the problem are youth. As a result, YPAR necessitates for adult and youth researchers to work together to investigate key issues and provide solutions. Youth possess expert knowledge rooted in their lived experiences with the contexts of the study (Canella, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Adult researchers bring knowledge of important elements of the research process and social contexts (Grace & Langhout, 2014). In YPAR, the

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perspectives of all stakeholders are necessary to create a rich product (Scott et al., 2014). Scholars disagree as to the extent of ownership of a project that youth researchers must possess for a project to truly be considered YPAR, and definitions vary from full ownership (Ozer & Wright, 2012) to engagement in any facet of the research process (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). While specific roles may vary, the expectation that YPAR is rooted in power sharing and participation is a key element across projects (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

As a conceptual framework, YPAR serves to interweave notions of activism and inquiry (Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011) by subverting traditional systems of research conducted on marginalized groups that benefit academia while providing little service to participants (Canella, 2008). In YPAR, youth and adult researchers work together to understand and change social injustices. With this directive, YPAR operates free of any guise of neutrality. One definition that makes the positionality of YPAR particularly evident was provided by Tuck et al. (2008), a collaborative project that took place in New York City. They described YPAR “as *politic-an* embedded and outloud critique of colonization, racism, misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism, classism, and xenophobia in our society, in our research sites, amongst our research collective, and within the larger and historical research community” (p. 51). Fine (2008) added to the conceptualization of YPAR by labeling the approach as epistemology rather than a research method. As such, utilizing YPAR often draws upon researcher positionality and skill sets aimed at disrupting social norms through critical analysis.

Theoretical Frameworks of YPAR

In this section, I look at the ways in which YPAR work is framed to challenge deficit models regarding youth. Such viewpoints contradict the traditional unidirectional education

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system in which adults are perceived as authorities. Instead, youth possess knowledge and attributes that make collaborative research mutually beneficial across participants.

Asset-Oriented Views of Youth

Youth participatory action research builds upon the work of Freire (1970) in challenging traditional conventions of education and justice to advocate for equal power dynamics across constituents. The value placed on youth knowledge and experiences with YPAR align with Freire's critique of the traditional banking model of education, which views students as empty vessels relegated to receiving, filing, and storing deposits of knowledge made by teachers. As an alternative, Freire advocates for a problem-posing style of education that positions students as critical co-investigators with teachers that create shared meaning and understanding. This view of education ties into Freire's larger framework of social justice, which advocates for *power with*, rather than *power over*, marginalized groups. YPAR models rely on the contributions and insight attained by student researchers. In contrast to traditional research that has been used to exploit marginalized communities (Tuck et al., 2008), YPAR emphasizes democratizing knowledge, fostering critical inquiry of daily life, and developing liberatory practices (Ginwright, 2008). Participants move from objects of study into subjects that work together to create change (Freire, 1970). Using this model, YPAR is framed as a venue for liberation through transformative change.

An important addition to Freire's (1970) framework expands upon the background and resources which marginalized populations bring to research. Building on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to challenge deficit perspectives placed upon communities of color, Yosso (2005) created a model of community culture wealth. The model emphasizes the assets these communities possess in six forms of capital across aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and

resistance. This model is applicable to a YPAR context in which youth utilize their perspective, skills, and connections to enhance awareness and generate solutions. These forms of capital often take the form of social and navigational capital in which “those who have been *most* systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). In YPAR, youth have the social connections to engage with the community experiencing the problem and the navigational prowess to maneuver within complex, oppressive systems. The focus on social change shows resistance capital in which youth leverage an emic, or insider, perspective to transform injustice (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Community cultural wealth complements the idea of *power with* by illustrating more specifically what strengths those communities possess.

Adultism and Youth Oppression

I position the ideas regarding the agency of marginalized populations within the discourse on the systems of oppression against children. Bell (2010) defined adultism as “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement. This mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes” (p. 540). The term is used synonymously with youth oppression (DeJong & Love, 2015). Adultism is rooted in consistent patterns of disrespect and mistreatment that can cause young people to feel powerless, disrespected, and dismissed. Youth are viewed at a deficit or treated as deviants with such pervasiveness that these perspectives become internalized and reproduced (Conner, Ober, & Brown, 2016). Such dynamics can also perpetuate other forms of oppression, as “young people’s first encounters with sexism, racism, and other relationships of domination and subordination occur when they have little power to change things, and no language to name their experience of oppression” (DeJong & Love, 2015,

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p. 494). Thus, adultism can serve as a catalyst to socialize youth into larger systems of social inequality if not challenged.

YPAR can perpetuate adultism in situations where youth involvement is tokenized, or used by adults to gain credit without actual impact or consideration (Conner et al., 2016). However, where true partnerships exist, YPAR work utilizes the resources and power bestowed on adults by society to create transformative change (DeJong & Love, 2015). For example, for Youth of Color, YPAR can serve as a forum through which to resist racism in daily life and facilitate empowerment (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015; Irizarry, 2011; Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014). However, to oppose these systems of disenfranchisement, youth need to be trusted as equal stakeholders and valued for their contributions. Models of youth liberation share power and decision making, acknowledging the knowledge and contributions that youth provide (Kivel, 2010). YPAR naturally opposes adultist dynamics because it frames youth as intelligent and capable individuals with power and options (Camarrota & Fine, 2008). Within YPAR, there are also complementary relationships as youth develop skills to organize for social change and tools to name injustice from adults as they provide a unique perspective (Camarrota & Fine, 2008). Thus, enhancing YPAR practice may lead to greater resources for marginalized communities in need of support and resources.

YPAR as a Tool for Liberation

In this section, I argue that YPAR can serve as a vehicle through which to challenge traditionally oppressive, adultist norms. A few areas illustrate the ways in which adult researchers can engage in YPAR work to pursue liberatory relationships. One facet frames the collaboration between adults and youth as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991; Torre & Fine, 2008), which necessitates an active commitment to working through manifestations of social

inequalities within research teams. A second examines how adult researchers can prioritize problem-posing education over a banking system of education (Freire, 1970) in ways that provide scaffolding and support. Finally, the goal of YPAR may not be the clear creation and dissemination of a final product in traditional formats (e.g., papers or presentations; Whitmore & McKee, 2001). Instead, the process of engaging in collaborative research is often an outcome unto itself that can support iterative growth and learning across demographics.

Contact Zones

Pratt (1991) first defined the concept of contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). In these spaces, participants understand that their actions will have heterogeneous, unpredictable impacts on others. As a result, contact zones provide crucial spaces for individuals to work with and through issues of difference (Miller, 1994).

Torre and Fine (2008) adapted the definition of contact zones within a YPAR context to serve as spaces “where very differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyze power inequities, together” (p. 24). Rather than assuming that it is possible to create an environment free from the larger social systems within which it operates, framing YPAR as a contact zone ensures that researchers center issues of privilege and oppression within collaborations. The goal of a contact zone is to actively engage dynamics of power and privilege as an impetus for learning. Rather than proposing that a YPAR project operates within a vacuum from systems of oppression, the contact zone framework uses the YPAR space as a learning laboratory to examine the ways that social and cultural contests manifest on an individual level.

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The resulting impact is that YPAR communities must engage in constant and active deconstruction of privilege.

Past YPAR studies illustrate how the concept of a contact zone can be useful to understand how negotiation and understanding occurs amongst the participants. In one example, youth researchers challenged the adults that had sought out a YPAR project in their community, arguing that adult researchers had perceived their experience to be at a deficit and thus sought out the initial collaboration (Walsh, Hewson, Shier, & Morales, 2008). For issues of adultism, the contact zone framework would expect that social bias and stigma against youth would be present in adult researchers engaged in YPAR due to the presence of those factors within society. Thus, adult researchers are not expected to be void of socialization prior to beginning a YPAR project. Instead, projects exist to give participants a chance to unlearn systems of oppression through negotiation with one another (Cannella, 2008). If adults and youth are equal members within a YPAR space, then both are assumed to enter with biases and prejudices to be unpacked. This negotiation then influences the research process and role models the ways in which “youth and adult researchers generate varied interpretations of many sorts of empirical materials, and together try to determine the contours, the consequences, and the vulnerabilities of unjust formations” (Fine, 2008, p. 222). Engaging in a contact zone may require that adult researchers, like youth, renegotiate their sense of self and undergo individual transformation.

Problem-Posing Education

One tenants of action research is that uncertainty is central to the nature of doing work (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). The focus of action research broadly, and YPAR specifically, is the process of engaging in inquiry. Grappling with uncertainty directly aligns with Freire’s (1970) idea of problem-posing education. This focus “affirms men and

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women as being in the process of *becoming*-as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 84). Problem-posing may be analogous to an emphasis on critical consciousness raising, described by Smith, Davis, and Bhowmik (2010) as dialogue that “facilitates students’ ability to examine and critique self-blaming cultural narratives, thereby supporting their emotional well-being and self-empowerment” (p. 180). In this way, recognizing YPAR as an opportunity for problem-posing education gives participants the chance to challenge adultism and to collectively negotiate shared understandings.

Problem-posing education is directly at odds with the banking model present in many educational systems (Freire, 1970), and provides a direct example of where youth and adults can collectively work together to challenge systems of adultism. While some YPAR scholars use the term apprenticeship to describe the process through which adults mentor youth through the research process (Kirshner et al., 2011; Morrell, 2008), such labeling continues to frame the relationship as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge. Instead, framing YPAR as problem-posing education acknowledges that different participants bring their skill sets, experiences, and goals to the process. Adult researchers contribute resources, trainings, and structure while youth researchers provide knowledge and perspective. Previous examples of YPAR projects highlighted ways in which adult researchers offered overviews of research methods or tools to support youth researchers, utilizing their knowledge to provide foundational knowledge for collective dialogue and decision making (Torre & Fine, 2008; Tuck et al., 2008). The resulting research is a more complete picture than a solitary adult researcher could obtain (Brydon-Greenwood et al., 2003). Simultaneously, youth benefit from the opportunity to challenge systems of oppression that frame their experience and to renegotiate relationships with adults

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(Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). A problem-posing approach allows diverse stakeholders to engage with an equitable educational process while unlearning systems of oppression.

Process, Not Product

In order for YPAR to truly challenge adultism, concrete research products must be relegated to a byproduct rather than the main goal. Just as Freire (1970) noted successful liberation promotes individual development over possessions, YPAR should not be bound to prove its merit through the traditional written report or other academic formats (Heron & Reason, 2001). Instead, the YPAR process requires a complete reconceptualization of traditional research (Fine, 2008), particularly in supporting participants as they unlearn internalized youth oppression. YPAR may not result in a clear product (Canella, 2008), instead spurring less tangible manifestations, such as the self-growth and awareness of participants (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2008). Instead of pushing participants towards a specific destination, YPAR is often seen as a significant landmark on a path that may support future opportunities and development. The approach of YPAR supports the mission of action research in challenging “an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation in favor of an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice” (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 13)

In emphasizing process over product, flexibility must form the foundation of YPAR work. For example, groups may need to adjust deadlines and goals to allow for the organic development and evolution of research groups. Flexible time limits prevent the likelihood that adult researchers will revert to adultist norms such as a strict agenda or procedure that is not co-created, resulting in power imbalance (Whitmore & McKee, 2001). Flexibility is also important because even perceived failures support learning. Through collaborative research, groups can process setbacks and interpret them while still celebrating other achievements (Cannella, 2008).

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Focusing on the process of YPAR rather than a product allows for researchers to engage with youth more authentically without the pressure of rigid, looming goals.

Key Considerations of YPAR

After establishing several ways in which YPAR can operate in opposition to societal dynamics of adultism, I now advocate for several considerations to support YPAR projects in challenging adultist dynamics. First, adult researchers must be willing to challenge traditional norms of scholarship and engage in work that may be dismissed by the academy. Secondly, adult researchers must commit to a process of ethical reflexivity by engaging in self-work around privilege they possess in systems of youth oppression. Finally, adult researchers must prioritize a youth-centered design that can meet the needs of various participants. While these suggestions target individuals, they also include collective and institutional measures. These additions acknowledge that many barriers adult researchers face are socially constructed and create shared accountability for creating change.

Challenging Research Norms

While action research transcends beyond academic contexts, there are specific challenges of conducting liberatory YPAR research connected to postsecondary institutions. Most prevalently, YPAR does not easily fit into the traditional systems of academic rewards, which prioritize peer-reviewed publication as the primary conduit for academic success for faculty and graduate students (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2004; Weber, 2011). Instead, the nontraditional returns and political nature of YPAR may be risky based on individuals' positions within the academy (Fine, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Many elements within YPAR align closely with service and teaching components of faculty positions, which receive minimal recognition and value

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within academia (Fine, 2008). Cannella (2008) captures the tensions of choosing to do YPAR work within traditional academic structures:

The choices PAR practitioners make often sacrifice the easier ways of doing their work-youth development, research, teaching-in favor of an approach that embodies their ideals. This work is unwelcome in many circles, in which the mandate is to ensure youth development programs can verify their intended “outcomes” are attained, and research is “scientifically based.” These narrowly defined requirements can be hard to extract from the fabulously complicated work (p. 189).

To engage in participatory action research in an authentic way, researchers may have to risk that their work may not be valued and be willing to operate outside of academic norms.

Moreover, research is increasingly driven by the need to acquire grant funding (Weber, 2011). Like peer-reviewed publications, grant funding as an indicator of success can create tensions regarding YPAR work. PAR projects run the risk of being co-opted by institutions looking for performative ways to show constituent buy-in rather than true collaboration (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). For youth researchers, such exploitation would reinforce adultism rather than provide an appropriate challenge. Some scholars suggest that to be ethical, researchers might have to move away from the agenda of a funding organization or institution (Walsh et al., 2008). However, funding also provides important resources to recruit participants and enable their participation (Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008; Whitmore & McKee, 2001). In some cases, funding may provide the crucial component that allows a YPAR study to occur. Adult researchers must grapple with the costs and benefits of institutional influence on YPAR and

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make choices that are in best service of youth, a challenge that can be amplified by individual positionality and resources (most notably, tenure).

Just as YPAR is collective process, so too are the ways to challenge and reconstruct research norms. One suggestion is that senior scholars use their voices to amplify the contributions of colleagues engaging in YPAR projects that may not result in the traditional products. For example, Fine (2008) shared her experiences writing letters of support for the tenure files of colleagues engaged in YPAR work, explaining the type of work and its importance. Not only do these projects connect to both research and service priorities, but directly connect to the values of access and social justice listed by many institutional mission and diversity statements. Furthermore, faculty experts often sit on the review boards for grant proposals and can advocate for peers by illuminating the value of such work. In these regards, allyship is particularly valuable across the academy to promote and sustain YPAR work. Finally, as YPAR transcends postsecondary contexts to involve youth, schools, and community groups, researchers can collaborate across these contexts to pool resources and enhance the visibility of YPAR contributions.

Reflexivity

To negotiate the tensions between scholar and activist roles present in action research (Brydon et al., 2003), individuals must engage in constant reflexivity. The idea of reflexivity has long been studied as a core tenant within qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Roberston, 2000). Reflexivity is defined as “a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). While reflexivity is commonly used to guarantee rigor in qualitative designs, it is crucial to ensure ethical conduct at every stage of the research process (Guillemin &

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Gillam, 2004). Engagement in reflexivity may change based on their position within research and how close the topic of study is to one's personal experiences (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity demands that researchers prioritize a mutually beneficial process guided by all members of the group (Robertson, 2000).

Ideas of accountability and reflexivity are central to conducting research with marginalized groups (Snow et al., 2016). One area largely absent from the literature is the idea that adult researchers must engage in reflexivity to challenge potential adultism within YPAR work. For example, many PAR researchers move on after the completion of their study while the community members effected by the research problem become increasingly aware of the issues but continue to lack the resources to provide solutions (Walsh et al., 2008). In this situation, institutional or academic norms do not facilitate continued engagement. Sustained relationships are valuable only as additional sources of data

Ethical development on behalf of the adult researcher is crucial to navigate the creation of research that does not further injustice. Qualitative research has several tools that promote such reflexivity, often drawn upon to ensure quality during data collection and analysis. When applied to YPAR, these tools can help to ensure that adult researchers engage intentionally in ways that challenge and disrupt adultism. For example, peer debriefing can ensure that communities of YPAR researchers routinely discuss challenges and experiences to provide feedback and accountability. The act of writing memos may provide an opportunity to reflect individually, while an audit trail can log choice made throughout the research process to ensure intentionality and transparency. While these techniques have long been applied to concerns about trustworthiness within qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), explicitly using them to address adultism and youth oppression provides new utility. Simultaneously, changes in

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institutional reward structures and prioritization, such as internal funding resources, courses releases, or research leaves, can support researchers doing this difficult, unrecognized work.

Such reflexivity also supports the creation of genuine relationships through the YPAR process. Freire (1970) describes the importance of humanizing pedagogy rooted in relationships between teachers and students. Even in challenging adultism, youth need guidance, love, discipline, and teaching (Bell, 2010). In YPAR, students may be more committed and work harder when they perceive caring and supportive teachers (Livingstone et al., 2014). For adult researchers, engaging in reflexivity supports being authentic and open. Such an approach can role model collaboration in the YPAR process and help to support a clear commitment and engagement with such communities.

Youth-Centered Design

Finally, researchers can challenge hegemonic norms by acknowledging that youth may be in different development stages or possess unique research goals. Thus, creating a design that can be adapted to diverse participant needs shift is crucial. Such processes should involve a collective dialogue to decide on action, implementation, and improvement (DeJong & Love, 2015). Resources such as the YPAR Hub at UC Berkeley offer different tools and materials to draw upon to approach collaborations. In addition, empowering youth to embrace leadership within collaborations offers an opportunity to dismantle adultism while promoting individual development.

Moreover, all participants do not need to be involved in YPAR in the same way to be equal contributors. As a youth researcher in a study by Tuck and colleagues (2008) noted, “fantasies that people might have about PAR, especially among youth, is that we all have to be the same and do everything the same way. PAR isn’t synchronized swimming!” (p. 68). Rather

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than a homogenous experience, PAR is messy and acknowledges that participants do not learn in the same way (Cannella, 2008). As YPAR seeks to engage participants in authentic cognitive tasks (Kirschner et al., 2010), those tasks may look different for the youth in question. While youth remain active producers of their own development, the growth in emotional management, motivation, and agency depends on the individual student (Larson, 2011). A key aspect of YPAR is to find ways to customize projects not only within youth research groups, but also across participants in ways that allow them to embrace their identity as constructors of knowledge (Canella, 2008). As a tool to truly challenge adultism, using an approach that centers equity over equality ensures that every participant gets what they need to be successful. If the goal of YPAR is to challenge societal hegemony, individual groups must reflect a similar prioritization of heterogeneity and inclusion.

Conclusion

Adult supremacy is “comprised of a set of beliefs, attitudes, policies, and practices that construct adults as developed, mature, intelligent, and experienced, based solely on their age and ensures that adults control the resources and make the decisions in society (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 490). In the United States, adult supremacy fosters exploitive relationships in which youth’s voices are marginalized or tokenized. While YPAR projects can challenge adultism, these collaborations may never truly have completely equal power sharing between adults and youth (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). It is unrealistic to think that an individual community can exist in complete isolation from the social and cultural dynamics within which it operates. However, in framing YPAR as a process through which systems of oppression manifest and provide opportunities for collaborative deconstruction, adult researchers can work with youth to engage in resistance and empowerment. Framing YPAR as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991; Torre &

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Fine, 2008), problem-posing education (Freire, 1970), and process allows for youth researchers to gain the skills and practice necessary to address social inequalities across various spheres.

Throughout this piece, I have argued for changes that can occur at individual, collective, and institutional levels to support YPAR work in countering adultist norms in research. Adult researchers can work to actively incorporate reflexivity into their practice. Collectively, researchers can share resources amongst one another to support a youth-centered developmental approach and to champion the value and realities of YPAR work within the academic community. At an institutional level, resources can be allotted to support the time and energy required to do YPAR work and provide recognition to the ways such endeavors support espoused values beyond rigid peer-reviewed articles. As such approaches and skills are often absent from traditional research training, action researchers must find communities to educate, support, and develop one another (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 17). Engaging in targeted efforts will help support the impact of YPAR in reaching broader audiences while making such work sustainable and visible.

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